

## Getting A Leg Up On Education

*By Henry Winckel, The Porterville Recorder*

Three-year-old Alexandra Villegas stood on the cement porch of her east Porterville home Friday morning eagerly awaiting the arrival of her mentor, Irma Ramirez. Ramirez is one of five parent educators at Alta Vista School who make home visits to children of migrant workers to prepare them for kindergarten. Thirty two families are involved in the program.

"When I started working here some years ago, I noticed that many of these kids did not come in ready," said Joe Cook, program director for Even Start and School Readiness. "They couldn't count, didn't know the alphabet and didn't understand English."

The Even Start and School Readiness programs are designed to help future students develop those skills.

Ramirez sat on the floor with Alexandra. She showed her cards with different pictures on them, asking the youngster to identify them in English.

Alexandra successfully named each one.

"Three months ago, she spoke no English," Ramirez said.

Ramirez and Alexandra spent about one hour together coloring pictures, reading books and identifying objects. Alexandra's mother, Justina, sat close by, observing.

Ramirez goes to the home twice a week. Each time, she leaves Alexandra with items like books, pictures to color, paint brushes, crayons - activities the young girl and her parents can work on together.

"One of the goals is to model interactive literary activities that parents can do," Cook said.

Another goal is to help migrant parents learn English. Educators are developing a video program that will allow Spanish-speaking people to learn English in their homes, Cook said.

Cook has been overseeing the Even Start and School Readiness programs for three years. The programs are funded by state and federal grants.

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